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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: May 16, 1961

SUBJECT: Khrushchev's Letter of May 12 to President Kennedy and Possibility of Meeting in Vienna, June 3 and 4

PARTICIPANTS: The President of the United States
Mr. Richard H. Davis, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs
Ambassador Menshikov, Soviet Embassy
Mr. Georgi M. Kornienko, Counselor, Soviet Embassy

COPIES TO: White House - Mr. Bundy Embassy Moscow
S/S
G - Mr. Johnson
S/B - Mr. Bohlen
S/P - Mr. McGhee
EUR - Mr. Kohler

At his request, Ambassador Menshikov called on the President at 10:00 a.m. today and read to him from an English translation made by the Soviet Embassy the text of a letter dated May 12 from Chairman Khrushchev in reply to the President's letter of February 22, which was delivered to Mr. Khrushchev by Ambassador Thompson in Novosibirsk on March 9.

After Ambassador Menshikov had finished reading the text, the President commented that the last time the subject had been broached was in the conversation of Ambassador Thompson with Foreign Minister Gromyko and he had indicated a reply would be forthcoming by May 20 when Mr. Khrushchev was expected to return to Moscow. At that time it was not clear when the conference on Laos would begin and when the international atmosphere would be conducive to a meeting or whether it should be put off. Now there have been these press reports about the possibility of a meeting. The President said he would wish to talk to Secretary Rusk before giving a definite reply but he would expect that in the next two days a reply might be given.

The President added that if it is decided to go ahead with the meeting in Vienna is a place which appeared to be mutually agreed upon and he would expect to leave late in the afternoon on Friday, June 2, from Paris and would stay in Vienna Saturday and Sunday, leaving Vienna either Sunday night or Monday morning. Secretary Rusk would accompany him.

The President continued that if he is going ahead on this meeting, one of the problems would be how this meeting should be described in public [redacted] statements

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statements. It would not be useful to say that we are going to reach agreement on Laos or a nuclear testing ban because if we could not reach agreement then nothing would come out of the meeting. It would perhaps be best to emphasize that this would provide an opportunity for a general exchange of views.

The President remarked that he had only met Mr. Khrushchev once before and that was as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the occasion of Mr. Khrushchev's visit to this country. The President was doubtful that any agreement on Laos or on nuclear testing would be reached by the time of his visit to Europe and it was important that the hopes of the peoples not be disappointed by false expectation of concrete results from a meeting. He wanted to better the present situation and not worsen it. In this connection, the President made a passing reference to reports which had already appeared in the press speculating on the possibility of a meeting between himself and Khrushchev.

Ambassador Menshikov slyly remarked that nothing had appeared in the Soviet press, as the President knew. The President responded that he had felt impelled to inform President de Gaulle of the possibility of this meeting in view of his official state visit to France, that inevitably this involved other's becoming aware of this possibility and, moreover, he believed that Chairman Khrushchev had informed Walter Lippmann during the latter's recent visit to Moscow. The important thing was that an accurate impression be given in any public statements which will be made as to the purpose of the meeting, which, in his view, would be for a general exchange of opinions on many issues which, of course, involve the interests of other countries and could not be the subject of negotiation or agreement between just the US and the USSR.

Ambassador Menshikov quoted from the final paragraphs of Khrushchev's May 12 letter referring to a general exchange of views.

The President then went on to remark that if we cannot accomplish anything concrete on a nuclear test ban, it would be doubtful that we could make progress on disarmament; that it was easier to make progress on a nuclear testing treaty and we should try to make progress there. One of the reasons the President desired to talk with Khrushchev was that he believed the nuclear test talks were crucial negotiations and if we failed it could not help affect progress on other matters, particularly disarmament.

There was then some discussion as to what Ambassador Menshikov should say to the press who were waiting in great numbers outside. It was agreed that Ambassador Menshikov should merely say that he had delivered a message from Chairman Khrushchev in reply to the President's letter of February 22. The White House would confirm this but not add anything until there had been a reply on the subject of a possible meeting with Chairman Khrushchev in Vienna. In this connection, the President pointed out that we would have to

talk

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talk with the Austrians and that he desired to talk with Secretary Rusk before giving a final reply. If it was decided to meet in Vienna, it would be desirable to discuss the type of public statement which might be issued by the US and Soviet Governments.

Ambassador Menshikov remarked that the President had used the word "if". The President replied that he remembered that in the last conversation between Ambassador Thompson and Gromyko that the Ambassador had said we would communicate our final decision before May 20 when Mr. Khrushchev was expected back in Moscow; that the final decision would depend on the international climate at the time; that a month ago the atmosphere was not as satisfactory as it had been previously or, perhaps, as it was today. However, the President would talk with Secretary Rusk and he would hope that a response could be made within the next day or so.